

# PROBLEMS IN ARTICLE USAGE FOUND IN JAPANESE ESL STUDENTS' COMPOSITISONS

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## I. Introduction

There are languages which have systems equivalent to the English articles (e.g. French and Spanish) and those that do not (e.g. Japanese, Turkish and Slavic languages). Many researchers revealed in their studies that the ESL learners of native languages (NL's) without articles have much more trouble in mastering the English article system than those of NL's with a similar system.

According to Oller and Redding's study (1971: 94), "...subjects which had a language background with formal equivalents' of the English articles were always at least slightly superior to and usually significantly better than any of the groups without articles..." It is obvious that the English article usage is problematic for Japanese ESL learners who do not have articles in their NL. Cancino (1976) demonstrates in her study that Marta, a 5-year-old Spanish girl, acquired

the English article system earlier than Uguisu, a Japanese girl of the same age.<sup>1</sup> Andersen (1983: 183) mentions: "Cancino attributes Marta's early acquisition of the articles to positive transfer from Spanish and Uguisu's late acquisition of the articles to negative transfer from Japanese. Spanish has equivalents of *the* and *a* which function very similarly to them [the English usage] while Japanese does not." Bertkua's study (1974: 283) also shows that Japanese ESL learners made more errors in article usage than Spanish counterparts.

Article usage is determined by the following noun and its usage in the sentence. There are *proper nouns* and *common nouns* in English. The latter group is divided into *count nouns* (or *countable/unit*) and *noncount nouns* (or *uncountable/mass*).<sup>2</sup> In Japanese there is no distinction between count and noncount nouns, nor are there morphemes which distinguish plural from singular, such as the English "-s." Since the usage of the English article depends on the following noun, as mentioned above, it is obvious that knowledge of English nouns and their usage is necessary to acquire the English article system. Kaluza (1963: 113) argues: "When studying the English articles "a," "the" or their absence [ $\phi$ ], we are really dealing with nouns, for the articles themselves are meaningful only together with the nouns."

This paper will focus on the article errors typical of Japanese ESL learners, in relation with nouns. Compositions written by Japanese ESL learners were analyzed to examine the errors in the English article usage. The primary objectives here were:

- 1) to see whether Japanese ESL learners' use of English articles correlates significantly with their overall English proficiency,
- 2) to identify what kind of errors of article usage appear frequently, and
- 3) to determine what usage of articles seems to be most difficult in connection with the noun system.

## II. Compositional Analysis

### A. Data and Method of Analysis

A total of 37 compositions were collected from four different English proficiency levels, Course 2, 3 and 4 (C-2, C-3 and C-4) in CESL

and Linguistics 101 and 102 (Ling 101 and Ling 102) at Southern Illinois University.<sup>3</sup> These compositions had been written by Japanese students, on different topics given by a teacher during a class, under a certain time constraint. They were corrected by native speakers of English. Errors on the article usage were categorized into three groups, based on Richards' study (1974: 186-187) and Mizuno's study (1985: 5), as follows:

1. Omission errors: omission of "a" or "the"
2. Substitution errors: "a" instead of "the," or vice versa
3. Redundant errors: the use of articles instead of " $\phi$ " (zero article)

The number of errors that were identified is listed in Table 1. The total number of words of 37 compositions was 7936. Table 2 shows the number of errors as a function of the total number of words.<sup>4</sup> The sentences which were contextually deviant and hard to comprehend were ignored. The errors that could not be categorized in any of three divisions just shown above were also ignored (e. g. on ~~our~~ <sup>the</sup> way).

Table 1  
Number of errors in article usage found in 37  
Compositions written by Japanese ESL students of various levels

		Course 2	Course 3	Course 4	Linguistics 101-102
Omission Errors	Omission of "the"	10	41	6	10
	Omission of "a"	10	24	10	6
Substitution Errors	"the" used instead of "a"	2	1	1	0
	"a" used instead of "the"	0	2	7	1
Redundant Errors	"the" used insted of $\phi$	1	4	6	3
	"a" used instead of $\phi$	1	6	6	1
Total number of errors		24	78	36	21
Total length of Samples in words		1199	2034	2490	2213

Percentage of errors in article usage found in the  
compositions as a function of total word length  
of the sample

Table 2

	Course 2	Course 3	Course 4	Linguistics 101 - 102
Omission errors	1.66	3.19	0.65	0.72
Substitution errors	0.17	0.15	0.32	0.05
Redundant errors	0.17	0.49	0.48	0.18
Percentage of total errors	2.00	3.83	1.45	0.95

$$\text{Number of errors} \times 100$$

$$\text{Number of total words}$$

Course 2 and 3, and Course 4 and Linguistics 101-102, were grouped together under the intermediate level and the advanced level, respectively, and shown in Table 3.

Table 3

Composites of Course 2 and Course 3, and  
of Course 4 and Linguistic 101-102

	Intermediate level	Advanced level
Omission errors	2.63	0.68
Substitution errors	0.15	0.19
Redundant errors	0.37	0.34
Percentage of total errors	3.15	1.21

## B. Results of Statistical Data

Tables 1, 2 and 3 summarize the frequency of errors at each level. As is shown in Table 3, the number of errors decreased as the level went up. Oller and Redding (1971:94) claim, "...in the teaching/learning process, the acquisition of articles goes hand-in-hand with other English language skills." Mizuno's study (1985:13) also proves that the article errors are reduced at the advanced stage, although some kinds of errors (redundant/substitution errors) are somewhat persistent. The article system can not be learned in isolation, but has

to be learned along with other grammatical structures. It is thus presumably a natural process in learning English as a second language that the article system is gradually acquired as the English proficiency level goes up.

The number of omission errors was drastically reduced at the advanced level, whereas the number of other errors stays almost the same. Because of less knowledge about the article system, intermediate students tend to omit articles more often than do advanced level students. It thus follows that substitution and redundant errors were relatively few at the intermediate level (almost the same in number as at the advanced level) as Table 3 shows.

Table 2 shows that the students of course 3 made more errors than those of course 2. The compositions written by the C-2 students were simpler in structure and less lengthy, so that they turned out to be relatively error-free. In addition, the course 2 students wrote compositions based on a model containing correctly used articles in context. The C-2 students obviously had less knowledge about the English article system than the C-3 students. On the other hand, the C-3 students wrote a more lengthy composition of far more difficult grammatical structures than the C-2 students, with no model. Their knowledge of the article system was less sufficient than the more advanced students (course 4, Linguistics 101-102). That appears to be why the C-3 students made more errors in the use of articles than the lower counterpart, the C-2 students.

### III. Discussion of Notable Errors

It is evident that the acquisition of the article system is related to the overall English proficiency. Knowledge of the noun system is particularly important since it is closely associated with the use of articles.

It is important to distinguish count nouns from noncount in dealing with problems of article usage. Figure 1 presents the English noun classes, based on *The Grammar Book* (Celce-Mercia and Larsen-Freeman: 1983, P.172) and *A Comprehensive Grammar of the English*

*Language* (Quirk et al: 1985, p.247).

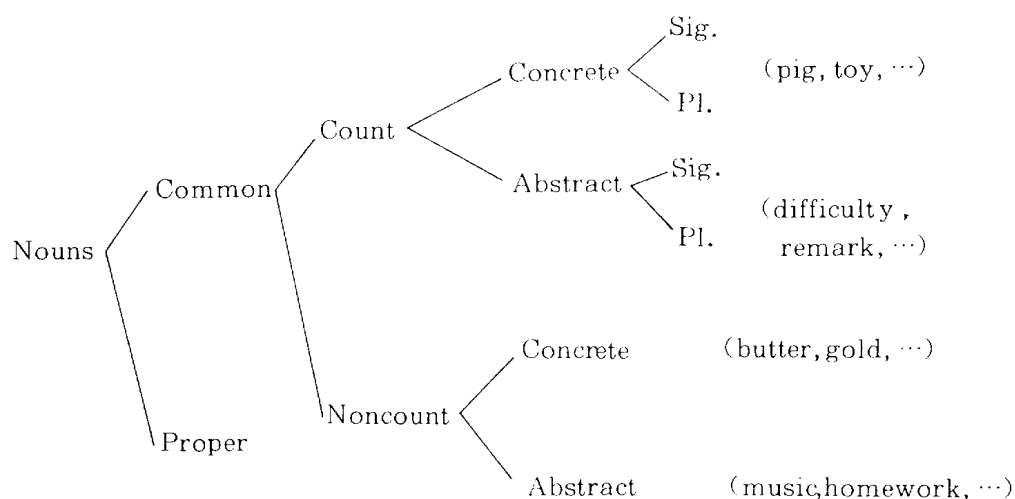


Fig. I : English noun classes

The two books mentioned above explain that in English there are nouns which have “dual class membership” (Quirk et al: 1985, pp.247–251), or “dual mass-count function” (Celce-Murcia and Larsen Freeman: 1983, pp.172-174). These nouns can be either count or noncount, depending on the context in which they are used. These nouns seem to be one of the barriers to understanding article usage. The following are examples of such nouns.<sup>5</sup>

- |   |                                  |
|---|----------------------------------|
| 1. She was a <i>beauty</i> in her youth.          | [count]                          |
| 1a. She had great <i>beauty</i> in her youth.     | [noncount]                       |
| 2. I want a <i>coffee</i> .                       | [count]                          |
| 2a. I like <i>coffee</i> .                        | [noncount]                       |
| 3. I want an evening <i>paper</i> . ('newspaper') | [count]                          |
| 3a. Wrap the parcel up in brown <i>paper</i> .    | [noncount]                       |
|   | ['wrapping paper']               |
| 4. I need a <i>glass</i> . ['water tumbler']      | [count]                          |
| 4a. She wears <i>glasses</i> . ['spectacles']     | [count]                          |
| 4b. The vase is made of <i>glass</i> .            | [noncount]                       |
|   | ['the silicate-based substance'] |

While there is not a remarkable change in meaning in pairs of nouns in examples 1 and 2, in those in examples 3 and 4 there is a noticeable semantic shift.

It is clear that the discourse context is essential to correct usage of nouns, which in turn is essential to the correct use of articles.

Brief explanations of the uses of articles are shown below, from *A Comprehensive Grammar of the English Language* (pp.265-274).

1. Uses of the definite article (pp.265-266) The definite article "the" is used to mark the phrase it introduces as definite, i.e. as 'referring to something which can be identified uniquely in the contextual or general knowledge shared by speaker and hearer.'
2. Uses of the indefinite article (p.272) A/an X will be used where the reference of X is not uniquely indentifiable in the shared knowledge of speaker and hearer. Hence a/an is typically used where the referent has not been mentioned before, and is assumed to be unfamiliar to the speaker or hearer.
3. Uses of the zero article (i.e. absence of article) (p.274) With plural count nouns and with noncount nouns the indefinite article does not occur. The zero article is used instead. (Though there are much more detailed explanations about the uses of articles, the above explanations are presented for reference.)

Now the noteworthy errors of article usage will be discussed in reference to the nouns that follow, and sources of the errors will be identified where possible. Other grammatical errors were corrected in advance.

### *1. Omission errors*

#### a. "a + common noun"<sup>6</sup>

At the lower level, most errors seem to have been made because the students lacked the basic knowledge presented above, as can be seen in sentences (1) and (2).

- ( 1 ) Pack up one's things in \_\_\_\_\_ bag. (course 2)
- (2) She is always wearing \_\_\_\_\_ pretty dress. (C-2) At the higher level, different types of errors stand out.
- (3) Second, the undeveloped countries have \_\_\_\_\_ high population. (C-4)
- (4) It is \_\_\_\_\_ small trouble. (C-3)
- (5) People in the U.S. usually like \_\_\_\_\_ oily taste. (C-4)

- (6) The door which is in the Japanese house is made of paper with \_\_\_\_\_ wood frame. (C-4)

Nouns in sentences (3), (4) and (5) are in some cases used as non-count nouns, but in other cases function as count nouns. That is, they are nouns which have “dual class membership,” explained before. Compare sentences (3), (4) and (5) with the following examples (3a), (4a) and (5a).

(3a) *Population* is one of the factors that determine the size of a city.

(4a) She is in *trouble*.

(5a) Her dress is in good *taste*. [‘a personal liking’]

It is hard for Japanese ESL students to grasp the notion that “population,” “trouble” and “taste” are count nouns because those words seem rather abstract to them. Thus it may not be surprising that they tend to think those nouns function only as noncount nouns.

In sentence (6), the word “wood” functions as an adjective that modifies the word “frame,” in the same meaning of the adjective “wooden.” Since “wood” is usually used as a noncount noun, again it may have given the students the false concept that the phrase “wood frame” is not preceded by the article.

- (7) In Japan the amount of ham or beef in \_\_\_\_\_ sandwich is very small. (C-3)

The error in sentence (7) seems to be attributable to the ingredient of a sandwich that is a noncount noun, i.e. bread.

- (8) It is clear that at that time \_\_\_\_\_ few educated people took the lead and managed people. (Linguistics 101)

In sentence (8), contextually “a few” should be used although the sentence is grammatically correct. The student who wrote it may not have known the semantic difference between “few” and “a few.”

b. “the + <sup>proper</sup>  
common nouns” (singular/plural)

Many Japanese students know that “the” precedes a noun which refers to something already mentioned, since this usage of the definite article is taught in the first year of English instruction at Japanese high schools, and later repeatedly explained. This is called “anaphoric reference” (Quirk et al: pp.267-268). There were actually



only a few cases of this usage of the definite article found in the compositions.

- (9) But in the seventeenth century, \_\_\_\_\_ Yamato river was north  
of Osaka. (C-3)
- (10) This is the first time to visit \_\_\_\_\_ U.S. (C-3)
- (11) My friend and I stayed at \_\_\_\_\_ Holiday Inn Hotel. (C-3)
- (12) I live in \_\_\_\_\_ Baptist Student Center. (C-2)
- (13) There is \_\_\_\_\_ Self Instruction Center in the basement. (C-3)

In general, proper nouns lack articles, but there are instances in which they take the definite article, such as in the names of rivers, seas and many others. The use of the definite article with proper nouns may be problematic for Japanese students because there is no systematic rule for that usage. Errors in sentences (10), (11), (12) and (13) were made possibly due to the lack of the knowledge that some proper nouns take the definite article. (Proper nouns can take the indefinite article when they behave like a common noun, which will be discussed later.)

What seems to have been particularly difficult for the Japanese ESL students, even at the advanced level, is shown in the following samples.

- (14) I went to \_\_\_\_\_ cafeteria with my friend. (Ling 101)
- (15) I went to \_\_\_\_\_ library after dinner. (Ling 101)
- (16) \_\_\_\_\_ Major industry is heavy industry. (C-3)
- (17) The first thing I learned in the U.S. is that we should not forget \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_ time difference. (C-3)

In sentence (14) and (15), it is understood through the context that the students were talking about "the cafeteria" and "the library" on campus. Surely the teacher who corrected the compositions knew what cafeteria and library the writers had meant. In sentence (16), it is also identifiable from the context that the student was talking about the major industry of "Sakai." Sentence (17) also demonstrates the same kind of example. The noun phrase "time difference" can be recognized as "the time difference between the U.S. and Japan" through the context. Since it is clear through the context that the nouns in question in the above sentences are restricted in meaning

although their referents have not been referred to previously, those nouns should take the definite article.

The construction “the” + noun usually occurs when the writer/speaker supposes that the reader/listener can identify the referent of the noun from shared knowledge of the situation. The students who wrote the above examples may not have known about this use of “the.”

(18) I think all these things are evidences that education is so important in \_\_\_\_\_ present society. (Ling 101)

(19) However, \_\_\_\_\_ younger generation have been changing in their belief. (C-4)

(20) I borrowed the tapes and the textbooks for \_\_\_\_\_ intermediate course of English. (C-3)

(21) I want to take EFL at \_\_\_\_\_ graduate level. (Ling 102)

The uniqueness of the referent that the noun denotes is recognized in each of sentences (18), (19), (20) and (21). In such a case, “the” is also used. For example, in sentence (18), it is obvious that there is a single thing that the phrase “present society” denotes. As is apparent in errors in sentence (14)-(21), the discourse context, as well as the knowledge of the classification of the nouns, should be taken into account for the correct use of articles.

(22) Now I’m going to mention some details of \_\_\_\_\_ differences in both cultures which Americans had better know not to be puzzled. (Ling 101)

(23) \_\_\_\_\_ Schedule of lessons at CESL in the morning is 8:40 to 11:50 for three lessons. (C-3)

(24) When we had dinner in the hotel, I was surprised at \_\_\_\_\_ quantity of meat. (C-3)

(25) \_\_\_\_\_ Night view of St. Louis was very beautiful. (C-3)

(26) In the Baptist Student Center, almost all the Japanese people are from \_\_\_\_\_ west of Japan. (C-2)

“The” is usually used when the referent of the noun is limited in meaning by the following phrase or clause as can be seen in sentences (22), (23), (24) and (25). In sentence (25), for example, the noun phrase “night view” is restricted to mean “the night view that belongs to St.

Louis," and not "any night view in general," and consequently should be preceded by "the." This use of the definite article is referred to as the "cataphoric use" of "the" (Quirk et al: pp. 268-269). Sentence (26) seems to be an example of "cataphoric reference," too. However, even with the absence of the following phrase "of Japan," the word "west," would need the definite article, as long as it means "the region in the western part" or "the westward direction" as in sentence (26), whose definiteness is apparent.

## 2. Substitution errors

### a. "a" instead of "the"

It was observed here that the students frequently made errors similar to what were found in 1. *Omission errors*.

(27) Nagoya is in *a* typhoon area. (C-4)

This error is similar to those found in sentences (18) -(21).

The context in which sentence (27) was generated made it explicit that there is only one typhoon area in Japan, so that the definite article plus "typhoon area" should occur.

(28) I'd like to compare my life-style in Japan with my life-style in the U. S. based on *a* style of houses. (C-4)

Sentence (28) illustrates the "cataphoric use" of "the" which has been mentioned in 1. *Omission errors*, as the meaning of the word "style" was restricted by the following phrase "of houses."

(29) The next difference concerns *a* door. (C-4)

The phrase "a door" in sentence (29) can mean "any one door that exists in the world," such as "the door of a dog house" or "the door of a restaurant." One of the assumptions in the context in which sentence (29) occurred is "the doors of the American houses which the writer is comparing to Japanese houses. Because of this narrowed meaning of the referent that the noun "door" denotes, the definite article should be used although the referent that the noun "door" denotes has not been mentioned previously.

### b. "the" instead of "a"

At the lower level the students seemed to lack even the basic knowledge that "a" is used when the referent of the noun can not be

identified in the know ledge of speaker or hearer, as sentences ( 1 ) and ( 2 ) show.

(30) I often read *the* book and study homework. (C- 2 )

(31) I'm studying English in *the* classroom at SIU. (C- 2 )

In the above sentences, the use of the definite article is inappropriate since the referents of both "book" and "classroom" are clearly general.

(32) Thus I will consider the problems in my analysis because it is *the* good way to find American students' problems in Japan. (C- 4 )

The idea that the student intended to express in sentence (32), through the context, is that "it is at least one of the good ways to find American students' problems in Japan," not that "it is the one and only way" which sentence (32) with "the" means. It is adequate to use the indefinite article in such a case. The explanation of such a difference in meaning between the use of "the" and "a" was given in explanation of the error in sentence (27).

### 3. Redundant errors

#### a. "a" instend of $\phi$

(33) The third problem is *a* language. (C- 4 )

(34) After *a* practice my friends and I eat a big meal. (C- 4 )

The problem of nouns with "dual class membership" is manifested in sentence (33) and (34), just as in sentences ( 3 )-( 6 ). The nouns "language" and "practice" behave either as count nouns or as non-count nouns, depending on the context. In these cases they denote "language in general" and "swimming practice in general, "by inference from the context. These nouns occur with no article since their concepts are not specialized. Note the diffrences between sentences (33) and (34), and the following.

(33 a) They must take a foreign *language*.

(33 b) The *language* of instruction was French.

(34 a) The *practice* of polygamy is still common in Arab countries. [ 'a customary way' ]

(34 b) Polygamy is a *practice* that is common in some Arab countries.

(35) I have *a* fun in drinking with my friends.

The word "fun" is a noncount abstract noun. Some abstract nouns are count and others are noncount. The students have to learn the usage of abstract nouns one by one, which makes it quite hard for them to use the article properly with abstract nouns.

(36) I had *a* breakfast. (C-2)

(37) I had *a* lunch. (C-2)

senten (36) and (37) illustrate that the students who wrote them assumed erroneously that the words "breakfast" and "lunch" were count nouns, like the word with the similar meaning "meal."

(38) Brazilian wives stay and work at *a* home all day.

The phrase "at home" in sentence (38) is a fixed expression. It is expected that the Japanese students know some of the fixed expressions such as a prepositional phrase, like "at home," or a verb phrase, like "go to school" since they are usually taught repeatedly at school in Japan. In this case the student either had not learned the expression "at home" or forgot.

b. "the" instead  $\phi$

The following sentences illustrate errors in article use with abstract nouns as in sentence (35).

(39) The foreign students while reading each section, can get knowledge about *the* English writing. (Ling 101)

(40) They can select Japanese history or *the* world history. (C-3)

The words "writing" and "history" appearing in sentences (39) and (40) are noncount abstract nouns. According to Quirk et al. (p. 286), noncount abstract nouns with a premodifier normally have no article. The Japanese ESL students probably knew that such names of areas of study as "writing" or "history" take no article, but they may have the wrong assumption that such nouns take the definite article when their meanings are restricted with a premodifier.

(41) I play *the* billiards. (C-2)

As is illustrated in the correction of sentence (41), the names of games or sport normally take no article (e. g. play tennis, play chess). probably the student who wrote this sentence was unfamiliar either with this, or with the word "billiards" since the word "billiards" rarely appears in textbooks used at schools in Japan.

(42) Recently, in most countries, *the* industry has been developing rapidly.

The concept of the word “industry” in sentence (42) is generalized as in sentence (16), so “industry” in sentence (42) needs no article. The word “industry” also has “dual class membership,” just like the words “language” and “practice” in sentences (33) and (34), respectively, so it can either take an article or none and can also be pluralized. Compare sentence (42) with the following examples.

(42 a) Construction is an *industry* that has shown rapid growth.

(42 b) The steel *industry* is declining.

#### IV. Concluding Remarks

The present study researched errors in the English article system made in Japanese ESL students’ compositions. One problem in this study may be that the composition used here were not written under the same title and length of words, although they were written under the same time constraint. If they had all been written in the same environment, the results would have more significantly shown the students’ English writing skills, and consequently their knowledge of articles. Yet still, the results of the present study will give some implications about the difficulties of Japanese ESL learners in general in the use of articles, and about guides for teaching the articles to Japanese ESL learners as well.

The frequency of three kinds of errors (omission, substitution and redundant errors) were reduced at the advanced level. From this result, it was made evident that the acquisition of the article system is closely associated with the knowledge of other grammatical structures. Pain (1974;205) claims: “The major difficulty about them [articles, prepositions and the tense system] is that they do not submit themselves to any easy generalization or overgeneralization based on some consistent regularity; the system of the second language in these areas demands a combination of decisions at several level of syntax.”

Omission errors were the most frequently produced errors of the three kinds at all of the levels (C-2, C-3 C-4 and Ling 101-102). Bertkua

(1974:284) concludes in her study: "...there is a single most important process underlying the strategy of an adult speaking a second language: simplification...The second type of simplification is exemplified by article deletion..."

Omission errors, the simplified process in the use of the article, were particularly noticeable at the lower level. This is the phenomenon found in the "interlanguage" of ESL learners of any language background.<sup>7</sup>

However, using articles correctly is more difficult for ESL learners of NL's without the article system such as Japanese than those of NL's with similar systems. Andersen (1983:184) remarks, referring to the Cancino's study of 1976, that: "The natural processes of acquisition that produce a simplified interlanguage without articles (and other grammatical morphemes) in early stages is thus reinforced by negative transfer from a language that does not have articles (Japanese). It appears that this early simplification in interlanguage is overridden by positive transfer in the case of the acquisition of English articles by Spanish speaker." Oller and Redding (1971:94) also states that there is positive transfer from NL with regard to the article use.

There were areas in the the use of articles that seemed particularly difficult for the Japanese ESL students. First of all, article with proper nouns was one of the difficult areas (sentenes (9), (10), (11), (12) and (13). Proper nouns basically do not carry an article, but some do. When they function similarly to common nouns, they take an article and can become pluralized. (e.g. *a* Mr. Brown ['a person called Mr. Brown'], Browns ['people called Brown'] and *the* Browns ['the family called Brown'], Such inconsistency in the rules of article usage with proper nouns causes Japanese ESL learners to make frequent errors in this area.

The second type of difficulty was found in the usage of nouns (both abstract and concrete) that have "dual class membership" (sentences (3), (4), (5), (33), (34) and (42)). Whether such nouns should be treated as count or noncount largely depends on the discourse context. It seems that, with regard to abstract nouns, their 'abstractness' often leads Japanese ESL learners to think incorrectly that they are always

noncount.

The third difficulty seemed to arise from the lack of knowledge that the definite article is used when a noun denotes specific reference for both writer/speaker and reader/listener, as in sentences (14)-(17). Through the context, the referent that the noun denotes can be identified although it has not been mentioned before.

Finally, the definite article occurs with nouns which have a referent that is unique, or a single thing or person (sentences (18), (19), (20), (21) and (27)). This is similar to the examples presented in the third difficulty in that the identity of the referent is shared by both writer and reader without its previous mention, but the identity in this case is more widely known. Cloze and Langendoen shows good examples of this use of the definite article as follows:

1. David was the doctor on duty that evening.

['He was only one doctor on duty that evening.']

(sentences (18), (19), (20), (21) and (27))

- 1a. David was a doctor on duty that evening.

['He was one of the doctors on duty.']

(sentence (32))

(from Cloze (1983:61))

2. Vince is the heir to Max's fortune.

['There is exactly one heir to Max's fortune.']

- 2a. Vince is an heir to Max's fortune.

['There is at least one heir to Max's fortune.']

(from Langendoen (1970:123))

The "anaphoric use" of the definite article is very much emphasized at school in Japan, as mentioned before. So the Japanese students may have unconsciously felt some hesitation to use the definite article before a noun whose reference has not been made before, like the examples in sentences (14)-(21) and (27).

Japanese ESL learners' incorrect use of the articles appears to result from the following factors.<sup>8</sup>

( i ) There is no article system in Japanese.

( ii ) Little attention is paid to the article system in the instruction of English at schools in Japan.



Articles are explained from the beginning of the instruction of English at school in Japan. One English textbook for the first year of junior high school in Japan enumerates the usages of articles, which was explained in Japanese in the original, in the notes at its end as follows:

*the use of "a"*

- 1) used before a count noun that denotes a single person or thing, usually not translated.

*the use of "an"*

- 2) used before a count noun that starts with a vowel instead of "a."

*the use of "the"*

- 3) used before a noun that can be clearly defined from the situation.

- 4) used before a noun that has been already mentioned.

- 5) used before a noun that is the name of musical instrument.

(e.g. play *the* piano)

- 6) used before an ordinal number plus noun.

(e.g. *the* first floor)

- 7) used before the word "same" plus noun.

(e.g. *the* same book)

- 8) used before a noun that is identifiable by everyone.

(e.g. *the* sun)

(from *New Horizon 1* (1985:97))

Of all the usages just mentioned, items 1), 2) and 4) are repeatedly taught at school in Japan. The rest of them are introduced wherever needed. Article usages other than listed above may be taught later at the higher level, if necessary for the teaching of other grammatical structures. The usage of the zero article is, however, rarely mentioned. It seems that at school in Japan, the article system is taught only sporadically and not in any systematic or detailed way, so that it is quite difficult for the students to reach a level at which they can use articles appropriately.

While it may be recommended that lists of the article uses, as just presented above, are provided for the lower-intermediate students, it is equally, or even more important that advanced students who have acquired considerable understanding of other grammatical features

learn the usage of articles in context-bound situations.

The proper use of article and noun largely rests on the context, as was demonstrated in the present study. Thus to teach articles in writing a composition is an effective way to make students understand the importance of articles and to acquire their usage.

At the high school level in Japan there is a tendency that only individual facts are taught, and that writing compositions, by which students can recognize how significant the correct use of articles is for communication, is rarely required. In such a setting, the students seem to have a hard time even acknowledging that the incorrect use of articles can hinder communication at both writing and speaking level. The understanding of the use of nouns is also indispensable in using articles properly. Greene mentions that it is important to take the context into account and to gain the knowledge about the noun system for the correct use of articles. She (1970:27) states: "...in actuality they [nouns] change class, meaning, and function according to the will of the user and the utterance-environment in which they occur." A cloze test may also be a good methodology to introduce the use of articles in the context, as Kumamoto (1985:76) suggest.<sup>9</sup>

It is expected that more research will be done on Japanese ESL students' use of articles. Whatever the results, they will give some insight into the Japanese ESL students' problems in the article use. It is hoped that the findings in such research will lead to improvements in the way articles are taught at school in Japan.

### Notes

- 1 This result from "Grammatical Morphemes in Second Language Acquisition---Marta" by Cancino (1976) is quoted in "Transfer to Somewhere" by Andersen (1983) edited in *Language Transfer in Language Learning* (1983).
- 2 The names of the two noun groups vary from one book to another, such as unit/mass (Cloze : 1983, pp.41-62) and count/mass noun classifications (Celce-Murcia et al : 1983, pp.171-188). In this paper, count/noncount classification is used.
- 3 CESL (Center for English as a Second Language at SIU-C) This is an English language institute attached to Southern Illinois University, for

foreign students most of whom wish to enter an American educational institution. There are five English proficiency levels (courses 1, 2, 3, 4, and 5) in CESL. The course descriptions from courses 2, 3 and 4 are as follows:

*Course 2*

The idea of cohesion is introduced as well as more difficult grammatical structures; students do exercises on *reference* and *connection* which help to provide cohesion. Students use the ideas, grammatical structures, vocabulary, etc. of a model to create *their own* compositions. At this level, the student is expected to produce more fully developed compositions with 3 or more paragraphs. However, they are highly structured and generally involve use of composition models.

*Course 3*

At this level, intensive work on paragraph development, topic sentence, various types of paragraph organization as well as detailed work in the formation of a complete composition (introduction, body, conclusion) are introduced. Organizational principles for writing arguments, such as compare/contrast, classification, etc. are also discussed.

*Course 4*

Clarity of expression and organization of ideas are the primary focus of this level. Its purpose is to prepare the student for classes at the university. Structures which, when misused, seriously distort meaning are the focus of the grammatical content of the course. As in course 3, the majority of compositions are based on readings or lectures. (from the guidelines of CESL writing class)

*Linguistics 101 and 102*

These courses are not for CESL students but for foreign students that are enrolled at SIU as regular students. The aim is to provide the students with an English proficiency level high enough to keep up with other classes. In the classes the students are frequently required to write compositions.

- 4 The methodology used here to make up Tables 1-3 was taken from Scott and Tucker's "Error Analysis and English-Language Strategies of Arab students," although in part changed.

(Scott and Tucker:1974, pp.75-76)

- 5 Examples 1-3 were taken from *A Comprehensive Grammar of the English Language* (p.247) and example 4 from *The Grammar book* (p.147).

- 6 The classifications a. and b. in *omission errors* were obtained from Kaluza's "Teaching the English Articles to Speakers of Slavic."

(Kaluza:1963, pp.115-116)

- 7 Selinker (1974:35) defined "interlanguage" as "a separate linguistic system

based on the observable output which results from a learner's attempted production of a TL [target language] norm."

8 Kumamoto (1985:79) also discusses Japanese ESL learners' problems in the usage of articles as follows:

"Their difficulty is partly caused by the fact that the Japanese language does not have articles. It is also caused by inefficient school materials and by the way they are taught."

9 Oller (1973:192) defines a "cloze test" as follows:

"The cloze test construction simply deletes every *n*th word (5th, 6th, or 7th usually) from a passage in prose. The student is then required to place the missing words or to restore the passage by placing other contextually acceptable words in the blanks." For the instruction of articles, not every *n*th word but every article is deleted.

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